

COMMENTARY

DREW MIDDLETON

Gulf War Entering Critical, Perhaps Final, Phase for All

The firing of a few hundred machine-gun rounds from an American warship in the Persian Gulf on Nov. 2 may have served to drive away an intruding boat, but it also diverts attention from some of the more significant weapons and forces of the Iran-Iraq war — a conflict in which the United States, whether or not Washington wishes to acknowledge it, is now deeply involved.

This involvement arises from two circumstances. First, America is giving armed assistance to the oil exports of Kuwait, a state that from the start of the Gulf war has been one of Iraq's leading supporters. Second, while this assistance continues, Iraq is free to continue its fairly successful air-sea offensive against Iran's oil industry, which supports Tehran's war effort.

We have not yet, of course, experienced major Iranian retaliation, which, if it comes, is likely to be delivered by Chinese Silk-worm missiles. Those are Chinese versions of the Soviet Styx, which was a highly successful anti-ship missile until the arrival of the French Exocet surface-to-surface missile, which is now in the Iraqi armory.

The Silkworm's 1,000-plus-pound warhead can damage a vessel of substantial size. The problem with the missile is that its radar guidance system can be jammed or chaff can divert it from its target. Although the Navy acknowledges that the Silkworm can operate at a range in about 5 minutes, it also is confident that it has the tools to divert the missile once detected.

Will the Silkworm be used? A normal government faced with the naval and air strength of the United States would continue to employ the Silkworm only against Kuwait targets, making defense from that country's American Hawk missiles and old Soviet SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles. But, as we know now, the government in Tehran is not a normal, rational one. Rather it is one prone to "go for broke" and use those Silkworms that remain from the original pur-



A Silkworm missile is launched during a military exercise in China. The weapon's 1,000-pound-plus warhead can severely damage a large vessel.

chase of 75. The adverse course of events in the Persian Gulf is not the only troublesome situation facing Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's regime. Late last month the government security council met to discuss for the first time the expanding operations of what it terms "terrorists" on its western frontier.

The attackers are the Mujahedeen Khalq, or People's Warriors, who have claimed from their headquarters in Baghdad to have killed or wounded 4,300 Iranian soldiers and officials in 94 forays into western Iraq. In the past 200 hours, these groups should always be taken with several

spoonfuls of salt. But reports from Western intelligence agencies in Tehran confirm that, although the figures of Iranian casualties may be exaggerated, the fact remains that the Mujahedeen are presenting an increasingly serious military problem for the Iranian army.

The elements of the problem are familiar. The best of Iran's regular troops are elsewhere — threatening Basra, training for a new offensive in the north. Raids by the Mujahedeen must be met by poorly armed local forces. The raiders, usually striking at night, have been particularly successful in most cases, numbers. The Mujahedeen's objectives in the at-

tacks include the destruction of arms and supplies. Their leader, Massoud Rajavi, who helped overthrow the shah, knows that the Iranian forces are running short of modern weapons and in a recent statement claimed that his forces had destroyed equipment worth millions of dollars.

Fragmentary intelligence reports from Iran and its neighbors indicate that the internal situation is vulnerable to this sort of resistance activity. Although the Khomeini regime's police have ruthlessly quelled any open signs of disturbance, these reports speak of widespread disaffection among two main groups.

The first is the urban middle class. Developed under the shah, it has lost jobs and standing. Its members no longer enjoy their old standard of living — not with lamb at \$35 a half pound. Within this class, the liberated women of the shah's era are the most outspoken critics of the present regime.

The second group is made up of the mothers and fathers of the "martyrs," the name commonly given to the young men who have been killed in the war with Iraq. While there has never been an official figure, some estimates run as high as 600,000 dead.

The official government position is that the parents are proud of their sons' martyrdom. But the government has done nothing financially for the parents, whose loss of sons to till farms or run shops would be the equivalent in our society to a loss of Social Security or an old-age pension.

Exploitation of that situation by the Mujahedeen or even a decisive Iraqi victory, if and when Tehran launches its much discussed "final offensive," could bring down the government. So, of course, would American retaliation for a Silkworm attack on Iranian ships. We are entering a critical, perhaps final phase of this long war.

CPYRGHT

Feb 87/19